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### Dingsbums und so

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## **Abstract**

Research has shown that vague language, which includes vague items (general nouns, general verbs, general extenders, vague clauses, clause final ellipsis and conversational implicature) and vague modifiers (vague quantifiers and other epistemic stance markers), is a feature of many languages, signalling a friendly attitude and modifying face threats. In order for language teachers to teach about vague language, they need to understand the preconceptions of their learners. This paper describes the beliefs of 178 German English language teachers and students. This study has shown that all the participants were aware of German equivalents to the English general nouns, verbs and extenders. Describing German vague language, they mentioned vague non-verbal indicators, vague responses to health enquiries, and vague epistemic stance indicators that indexed explicitly a lack of knowledge. They emphasised that these forms are reserved for family and close friends, and expressing closeness. They believed that they were not appropriate in formal settings, being associated them with a low level of education and youth talk. They also pointed to negative connotations of indifference, and impressions of laziness and incompetence that vague language can create. The paper suggests applications of findings for language educators.

## **1. Introduction**

Vague language (VL) features, such as ‘thing’, ‘stuff’, ‘or something’, ‘and all the rest of it’ and ‘sort of’, are prevalent in spoken and written English, especially in everyday informal conversations. They have important social functions, such as creating a relaxed atmosphere, establishing interpersonal rapport and mitigating face threats. Yet VL is popularly believed to be sloppy, woolly and inadequate (Channell,

1994; Jucker, Smith and Lüdge, 2003; Koester, 2007), and this attitude abounds amongst language educators, as well as course-book and writing-manual authors. English language educators who do wish to teach about VL, because they are concerned that a lack of familiarity with it may deprive learners of opportunities to accomplish their communicative goals (Fraser, 2010) and indeed to boost interpersonal rapport (Cheng, 2007), need to know what preconceptions learners can bring with them about VL from their own languages, since a negative attitude could be a barrier to learning. VL in languages other than English has been investigated in studies of naturally-occurring language, and such studies indicate where native speaker of English (NSE) and non-native speaker of English (NNSE) norms overlap, thus helping learners by identifying areas of potential positive language transfer and warning them of areas where transfer is a risk. However, there is a dearth of research into the beliefs of speakers of other languages about the functions of their VL.

This paper describes part of a study that explores such beliefs, driven by a desire to understand the differences between languages, as regards speakers' perceptions of vague forms, the functions that they perform and the impressions that they create. The paper focuses on the metapragmatic awareness (Verschuieren, 2000) of native speakers of German (NSGs). 178 TESOL and English linguistics educators and English major students were asked

- whether they could find equivalents of English VL in German
- how easy it was for them to translate English VL
- whether they were aware of other forms of VL in German
- what social dimensions they associated with VL in German.

The paper begins with descriptions of English VL and its functions, reviewing literature on variation, so as to establish general points of comparison with German VL, and enable an interpretation of respondents' beliefs about equivalent social dimensions. It then surveys accounts of VL in other languages, including German, to enable a qualitative comparison of this study's findings as regards perceptions about VL with findings from studies of VL actual usage.

## 2. English vague language

English VL comprises vague forms and vague modifiers. These serve textual, epistemic and sociopragmatic functions. Studies have suggested that VL varies according to geographical and social contexts.

### 2.1 English vague forms and vague modifiers

The term 'vague forms' is used to refer to words and expressions which are vague in themselves, that is to say, inherently vague lexical items and grammatical structures. The term 'vague modifiers', on the other hand, is employed to denote expressions that add vagueness to other items, structures or entire utterances.

Vague lexical items include general nouns, general verbs and general extenders, all of which are empty semantically and highly dependent on the context for their meaning. General nouns are maximally generic vague nouns (Andersen, 2010:36) such as 'thing', 'stuff', 'people' and 'place', which top the superordinate hierarchy, and are so empty semantically that they are on the borderline between a lexical item and the personal pronoun, examples being 'That *thing* works very well' and 'they've brought all the *stuff*'. Cutting (2007) distinguishes between standard general nouns 'thing', 'stuff', etc., and colloquial general nouns, which include informal vague lexemes such as 'thingy', 'thingymajig' and 'thingummybob' and general nominal clauses functioning as one lexeme such as 'what-you-call-it', 'whatsisname' and 'what's-her-face'.

General verbs are also empty semantically. This category includes the pro-verb 'do', whose meaning resides in the exophoric context, as in 'I'm not *doing* anything today', and the lexical 'do' verb, which can be contrasted with a contentful expression rendering the same proposition, as in 'You *do* Language Planning don't you?' where 'do' means 'take the course'.

General extenders are phrases such as 'and so on' and 'or something' that occur at the end of a phrase or utterance. This is the most widely researched area of VL, outside studies of vague modifiers. Early studies suggested that they indicate that the preceding exemplars are part of a larger set that it is not necessary to list, as in 'You can put your books *and stuff* in this bag if you want', and that the preceding

element is 'an illustrative example of some more general case', as in 'He'll have a drink at a party *an' that*' (Dines, 1980:22). Adjunctive general extenders ('and' + general noun phrase), as in 'and things', 'and stuff' and 'and all the rest of it', are hedges that observe the cooperative maxim of quantity, implying that more could be said. Disjunctive ones ('or' + general noun phrase), as in 'or something (like that)', 'or anything' and 'or whatever', act as hedges that observe the cooperative maxim of quality, implying that what has been said is possibly inaccurate. Since the 1990s, research has focused on the interpersonal social functions of general extenders in interaction, as outlined in the next section.

As regards vague grammatical structures, these occur at clause and utterance level: vague clauses, clause final ellipsis and conversational implicature, which again assume that the hearer or reader (henceforth addressee) can understand by accessing shared knowledge. Vague clauses are those with low semantic content such as 'Are you going to do *what you thought you'd do?*' Clause final ellipses are unfinished ends of utterances as in 'They had the er mental and the ...'. Conversational implicature (Grice, 1975) is vague in that a whole proposition is implied and can be appreciated only by addressees with the relevant background knowledge, as in the ironic 'I really like the teacher very much'.

As far as vague modifiers are concerned, these include vague quantifiers and other epistemic stance markers with a hedging function. Vague quantifiers, generally used as a matter of convenience when more precision is not merited, can be numeric or non-numeric. The numeric ones are vague quantity expressions that modify a number, as in '*about* 30 subjects' and 'We're meeting seven-*ish* or maybe a bit later' (Carter and McCarthy, 2006:204). Non-numeric quantifiers do not accompany numbers, examples being 'She's got *lots of* things to tell you' and '*a number of* samples'. Other vague epistemic modifiers are adjectival or adverbial expressions used to qualify the writers' commitment to the truth value of a proposition (Lakoff, 1972). These include modal adverbs such as 'probably' and 'maybe', pragmatic force modifiers as in '*sort of* pushing and shovelling around' (Cutting, 2000) and 'We had snowdrops but the frost *kind of* killed them I think' (Carter and McCarthy, 2006:224), and colloquial adjectival particles, as in 'plastick-*y*' and 'mountain-*ish* things'.

## 2.2 Textual, epistemic and social functions of English vague language

English VL serves textual, epistemic and sociopragmatic functions. The textual function is one of lexical and grammatical cohesion. This is the case of 'That's the school I work in. I love *the place*', in which the general noun 'place' refers anaphorically to 'the school', and the case of 'I'll make soup out of the potatoes, the cabbage *and the rest*', in which the meaning of the general extender is dependent on the addressee understanding the other possible members of the category which contains 'the potatoes' and 'the cabbage'.

VL's epistemic function can be seen in hedges that warn addressees against drawing implications that are too specific. Although the main *raison d'être* of vague quantifiers and other vague epistemic stance markers is to express tentativeness and doubt, vague lexical features can also imply that the speaker or writer (henceforth addressor) is not sure that the information is correct, as can be seen in the propositionally hedged disjunctive general extender in 'Look it up under insert table *or something like that*', or that they are not sure of the word used, as the lexically hedged 'then there's this huge *what-you-call-it* breaking the surf' shows.

The sociopragmatic function of VL is generally concerned with social cohesion, politeness strategies and face-saving. This is now seen as the main function of VL (Overstreet, 2011:297). VL can create, and be created by, a friendly atmosphere, contributing to the naturalness, informality and convergence of everyday talk. Vagueness can be employed in expressions of positive politeness that show solidarity towards an addressee (Brown and Levinson, 1987), signalling closeness and high involvement (Tannen, 1984), implying 'we don't need to be more explicit, do we, because we share so much and know what we're talking about'. Adjunctive general extenders such as 'and stuff' are markers of intimacy, exploiting the shared social space of a close relationship, which can be used to 'establish a social persona or a regional identity', stressing in-group membership, social similarity and positive politeness (Aijmer, 2013). VL can also be used to show negative politeness, helping the addressor to avoid imposing by mitigating the force of their utterances, softening complaints and criticisms (Jucker et al., 2003), avoiding appearing overly confident, authoritative, and direct, as in 'so you have to then try and *go a bit further beyond* the actual differences' (Ruzaité, 2007:168) or seeming offensive, derogatory and

pretentious (Channell, 1994). Zhang (2013) noted that 'I think', 'some' and 'or something' were used in cases of topic sensitivity in asylum seeker discourse.

VL is not always a matter of politeness. It can be used to exclude overhearers and protect privacy, as in 'Did you bring *that thing*?' VL also has a real-time processing function, serving as a filler or a staller for time (Overstreet, 1999:102).

## 2.3 Geographical variation of English vague language

Research has shown that VL is a feature of global English. It varies according to the variety of English, and also according to the first language background of the speaker. As far as world Englishes are concerned, differences have been discovered in American English (Fernandez and Yuldashev, 2011; Overstreet, 1999), Canadian English (Tagliamonte and Dennis, 2010), New Zealand English (Terraschke, 2007), Australian English (Dines, 1980), British English (Channell, 1994; Cheshire, 2007; Palacios Martínez, 2011; Pichler and Levey, 2011) and six varieties in the International Corpus of English (Aijmer, 2013:131-137). These studies will be discussed in relation to social variation: see section 2.4.

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) studies have examined how much English VL NNSEs use. There is little consistency of findings. Many have found that NNSEs use it less than NSEs (Drave, 2001; Gassner, 2012), and some have discovered that they use no VL at all (Shirato and Stapleton, 2007). Other studies have revealed that they use as much as NSEs (Aijmer, 2002; Cheng, 2007; Warren, 2007), and still others that they use more (De Cock, Granger, Leech, and McEnery, 1998).

There have been a number of comparisons of NSE and NNSE usage, in terms of the choice of vague forms and modifiers. De Cock (2004) noted that French NNSE university students relied on 'and so on' and 'etcetera', whereas NSEs seemed to prefer the more informal 'and things (like that)', 'and everything', and 'and stuff (like that)'. Cucchi's (2010) study of European Union parliamentary debates also showed that, although NNSEs used 'etc' more frequently than NSEs did, they used 'and so on' less frequently, contradicting De Cock's findings. Metsä-Ketelä (2012) found that 'more or less', 'in a sense', and 'to some extent' were widespread in the English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings (ELFA) corpus, whereas the more informal 'and stuff (like that)', 'some sort of', and 'and all' were common in the Michigan Corpus of

Academic Spoken English (MICASE). Fernandez and Yuldashev (2011) explored general extender usage in instant messaging interactions, finding that NNSEs from several backgrounds utilised fewer disjunctive and societal (culture-bound) ones than US NSEs. Parvaresh, Rasekh and Izadi (2012) found that Persian NNSEs used VL items that NSEs would not routinely use, transferring from Persian to English 'and and and' (*væ, væ, væ*) and 'and this and that' (*væ in, væ un*).

Studies have suggested that NNSEs' use of English VL is different from NES' in terms of function. NNSEs seemed to lack an awareness of functional subtleties. Parvaresh et al. (2012) examined 'and blah blah blah' and 'and so on', finding that speakers of Persian used both with a range of stances and settings, where the US NSEs reserved 'and blah blah blah' for a pejorative meaning and 'and so on' for formal speech. Aijmer's (2002) study of vague hedges used by Swedish NNSEs showed that they were unaware of their politeness function in NSE talk.

Turning now more specifically to German NNSEs, they have been shown to use English general extenders in an inappropriate way. Terraschke and Holmes' (2007:212-13) study of German NNSE interactions with New Zealand NSEs showed the German speakers using 'or so' not as a numeric vague quantifier as in '20 *or so*' (as NSEs would), but as general extender as in 'I don't know how how much the New Zealand wine is maybe it's like the Australian's just the cheapest *or so*.' Terraschke (2007) attributed the fact that German NNSEs used 'or so' much more than New Zealand NSEs did to a transfer of *oder so*, a high frequency disjunctive in German. She discovered, too, an absence of 'and things' in the German NNSE speech, explaining it by a lack of word-for-word equivalent to 'and things' in German.

## 2.4 Social variation of English vague language

Studies of variation in NSE VL usage focus on setting, gender, age and class. VL usage has been shown to be useful in a range of settings. Vague modifiers used by teachers and students in the British National Corpus and the MICASE (Ruzaité, 2007) in academic settings allowed them to save face, softening confessions of problems and mitigating self-critical utterances. Vague modifiers used by learners in Rowland's (2007:79-97) study of mathematics classrooms were considered by teachers as valid learner responses when making predictions and generalisations



when they were uncertain. Adolphs, Atkins and Harvey (2007) discovered that health professionals in hospital consultations use vague modifiers and general extenders to mitigate directives and soften distressing subjects for patients. In her investigation of court-room discourse, Cotterill (2007) found eyewitnesses in court using general extenders to indicate uncertainty. Koester's (2007) study of office environments revealed that those with a dominant role used VL to soften directives in meetings.

As far as gender is concerned, there is little consensus as to its influence. Some claim that VL does not vary according to gender (Cheshire 2007); others have discovered that males use general extenders more than females do (Pichler and Levey, 2011); still others have found that females use them more (Levey, 2012).

Studies of age and VL are not much more consistent. Stenström, Andersen and Hasund analysed the Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language (COLT) and found that, although teenagers used VL less than adults, "in the teenage world it is cool to be vague, and it is cool to demonstrate that one cannot be bothered to be precise", as in "they *like* wanna see *like* how we talk *an' all that*, you know" (2002:86-88). Since then, some researchers have found that young people used more VL than older people (Tagliamonte and Denis, 2010; Pichler and Levey, 2011), and others that teenagers used as much as adults (Palacios Martínez, 2011). Studies are more consistent when they explore choice of general extender, young people's tending to be more informal than adults'. The Canadian young people in Tagliamonte and Denis' (2010) study frequently used 'and stuff', and the teenagers in COLT preferred 'and blah blah blah', 'and stuff like that', 'and crap', 'and junk like this' and 'shit like that' (Stenström et al, 2002:100), whereas typical of adults in Tagliamonte and Denis' (2010) study was 'and things', in the Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English (DCPSE) was 'and so on and so forth' (Palacios Martínez, 2011), and in the British National Corpus (BNC) 'or what have you' and 'or whoever'.

As far as social class is concerned, general extenders are again the preferred VL form for study. Where Dines' (1980) study of Australian NSEs suggested that general extenders were used more by working-class speakers than middle-class ones, and that they were felt to be inappropriate in the speech of educated individuals, other studies have compared social classes in terms of choice of extender type. Cheshire (2007) revealed that English NSE working-class people favoured 'and that', whereas middle-class people frequently used 'and stuff' and 'and

things'. Pichler and Levey's (2011) study confirmed British working-class people's preference for 'and that'.

Some researchers doubt that findings about the influence of setting, gender, age and class are conclusive. Cheshire (2007) warns that general extender usage is extremely context-dependent, making it meaningless to generalise with regard to variables such as social class, age and gender. As Overstreet (2011:308) notes, "the particular function of a vague expression has to be interpreted locally in context".

### 3. Vague language in other languages

This section summarises findings vis-à-vis French, Japanese, Mandarin, and Norwegian, in order to illustrate how VL has similar functions across cultures. It moves on to German VL, to enable a comparison with the findings of this project.

As regards French, Mihatsch (2010) found that *espèce de* (literally 'type of') functions as a vague modifier in the same way as *sort of* does, and that *ou quelque chose comme ça* is equivalent to 'or something like that'. Kleiber and Gerhard-Krait (2006) identified *quelque part* (literally 'somewhere') performing as a vague adverbial hedge meaning 'in a way'. Lauwereyns (2002) pointed out that the Japanese general extender *toka* after a self-quotation was aimed at establishing rapport with the addressee, while Suzuki (2008) noted that the general extender *mitai-na* and general verb *tari suru* ('do things like') were used for negative politeness. Ran (2010) concluded that the Mandarin vague modifier *ba* was used to soften a face threat. Jiang (2012) found the Mandarin vague modifier 'verb + *yixia*' ('for a short while') in TV serials mitigating directives, assertives and offers, while Ning, Wang and Zhang (2012:255-56) observed how Mandarin VL in advertisements could be used to deceive consumers. Andersen (2010:36-38) found Norwegian general nouns *tin*, *sak* and *greie*, and adjunctive general extenders *og saker*, *og ting* and *og greyer* in informal settings and relaxed styles. These findings resonate with those about English VL.

As far as German VL is concerned, research has concentrated on general extenders and their functions. In Terraschke's (2007) study, *oder so* ('or something') and *und so* ('and things') were the most frequent in dyadic conversations. Schwitalla (1997) explored *oder so* and *und solche Sachen* ('and such things'), finding that they

functioned mostly as hedges and list completers. Overstreet (2005) compared German and English telephone conversations and face-to-face interactions among familiars, the German general extenders including *und so, und so weiter, und was weiß ich, und (so'n) Zeug, und solche Sachen, und alles Mögliche, und so was* and *oder so (was)*. She discovered that in both databases, disjunctive forms outnumbered adjunctive ones, and that all general extenders marked assumptions of similarity and solidarity, and could be used as intensifiers to emphasise and encourage an answer to a question. Terraschke and Holmes (2007) found that the most frequent functions of German general extenders were to show uncertainty as in *ja, ich hab neulich gesehen ich glaub Stickmen oder so ähnlich* ('the other day I watched I think Stickmen *or something like that*'), create affective rapport as in *ja, ich find das irgendwie das System find ich doch schon sehr verschult mit Hausaufgaben teilweise und so'n Mist* ('I think the system is very much like school with homework *and shit like that*') and attenuate negative discursive moves as in *es ist immer nett mit (einen) ihnen und so, aber so richtig, also ich hab schon gemerkt, dass sie teilweise sehr veraltet waren in ihren Einstellungen und so* ('it's always nice with them *and stuff*' but I noticed that they are very conservative in their attitudes and beliefs *and stuff*'). Studies of German general extender usage suggest that they are similar to VL in English and other languages: they have an epistemic function of hedging and a sociopragmatic function of marking politeness.

The study described in this paper asked NSG educators and students whether they could find equivalents of English vague forms in German and how easy it was for them to do so, in order to ascertain whether they were aware of German forms of referential vagueness. It also asked participants whether they were aware of other forms of VL in German, in order to discover the level of their metapragmatic awareness as regards their own language. It asked what social dimensions they associated with German VL in order to reveal their perceptions of the functions that it performs and the impressions that it creates.

#### **4. Method**

The data was collected by questionnaires, piloted in Edinburgh with speakers of various languages other than English, between 2008 and 2013 in Karlsruhe,

Germany and Edinburgh, Scotland. Respondents were NSG English educators and English major students, who attended lectures on techniques for raising awareness of English VL in language classes.

The questionnaire had two parts (see Appendix). Part One contained ten short excerpts from naturally-occurring interactions in which speakers used English general nouns, general verbs and general extenders. Vague lexical items were chosen for analysis because the study focused on intrinsically vague items with a predominantly sociopragmatic function. There were no excerpts with 'and stuff', despite its frequent daily usage, since the 26,000-word mini-corpus from which the excerpts were taken had only two tokens. All but three of the excerpts had VL with a sociopragmatic function of expressing solidarity. Question 2's VL had a textual function, cohering with other vague lexical items, while Questions 8 and 9 contained mildly face-threatening talk about the interlocutor's plans mitigated by VL.

Part Two contained three open questions. Respondents were asked if the English VL could be translated word-for-word into German. They were invited to note down other features of vagueness in German, and to explain what social contexts German VL are used in, for what function and what impressions they create.

When the questionnaire was being administered, the researcher read out each Part One excerpt, explaining fully what was meant and required each time, to ensure maximum comprehension. Respondents were encouraged to add any information that would help the researcher to understand the answers, for example, explaining parts of speech in the translation. For Part Two, respondents were given all the time that they needed to answer the open questions. Again, the questions were read out and re-phrased to enable comprehension.

For the data analysis, an NSG research assistant collated the questionnaire information on an Excel spreadsheet. She had a column for each suggestion from the respondents, counting the instances of each answer type. She then added another column for her own explanation or commentary (see Table 1 column 4), in order to check the reliability of findings. Finally, the researcher calculated the percentage of each type out of all answers for each question, to find the most frequent answers for Part One, and carried out a thematic analysis of Part Two answers. An NSG German lecturer checked the German spelling in this article.

## 5. Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the most frequent suggestions for equivalents of English VL in German, taken from Part One answers, indicating the percentage of German forms out of all types offered for each English VL expression. Only the forms that constituted 6% or more of the forms suggested are listed in the table. Equivalents for 'do' are not listed, as all respondents suggested *machen* and *tun*, in a variety of appropriate tenses.

**Table 1**

Perceived German equivalents for English Vague Language

English VL	German VL	%	Explanation
<b>General Noun</b>			
'that thing'	<i>das Ding</i>	23	that thing
	<i>es</i>	14	it
	<i>das Ding da</i>	11	that thing there
	<i>das Zeug</i>	8	stuff
	<i>das</i>	7	this/that
	<i>Teil</i>	7	part/thing
	<i>das da</i>	6	this there
'these things'	<i>von diesen Dingen</i>	16	of these things
	<i>von denen</i>	12	of these
	<i>diesen Dingen</i>	7	n/a*
	<i>diese Dinge</i>	7	n/a
	<i>den Dingen</i>	6	of these things
	<i>diese Teile</i>	5	these parts/things
'the same things'	<i>das gleiche</i>	16	the same
	<i>die gleichen Sachen</i>	15	n/a
	<i>das selbe</i>	11	the same
	<i>die gleichen Dinge</i>	8	n/a
	<i>die selben Sachen</i>	7	direct translation
	<i>alles</i>	5	everything
'what-you-call-it'	<i>Dingsda</i>	9	thingy

	<i>Ding</i>	9	thing
	<i>wie sagt man nochmal</i>	7	how do you call it again
	<i>was auch immer</i>	7	whatever
	<i>wie heißt das nochmal</i>	6	how do you call it again
	<i>wie man sagt</i>	5	how one says
'thingymajig'	<i>Dingsbums</i>	56	thingy
	<i>Dingsda</i>	11	thingy
	<i>Teil</i>	8	part/thing
	<i>Ding</i>	5	thing
	<i>Dingens</i>	5	thingy
'a few people'	<i>Leute</i>	77	people
	<i>Menschen</i>	8	humans
'all the people'	<i>alle Leute</i>	34	all people
	<i>alle</i>	30	everyone
<b>General Extender</b>			
'and all those kind of things'	<i>und so</i>	10	and so on
	<i>und so weiter</i>	9	and so on
'or something'	<i>oder so</i>	40	or so
	<i>oder so was</i>	23	or something like that
	<i>oder was</i>	21	or what
'and things'	<i>und so</i>	39	and so on
	<i>und so was</i>	12	and stuff like that
	<i>und so weiter</i>	10	and so on
	<i>und solche Sachen</i>	5	and such things

\* 'n/a' indicates words and expressions which the respondents did not offer an equivalent for or explain the German in grammatical terms

There was a high level of agreement that the standard general nouns 'thing' and 'stuff' were the same as *das Ding*, *das Zeug* and *Teil*, and 'people' was equivalent to *Leute*. Many respondents translated the unmodified general nouns with pronouns (*es*, *das* and *von denen*). Some translated the modified general nouns by eliding the noun (*das gleiche*, *das selbe* and *alles*). Respondents agreed on equivalents for the colloquial general nouns, offering *Dingsda*, *Dingsbums* (56% of respondents) and

*Dingens* with little comment, although some translated them with the standard general noun *Ding*.

General extenders ‘or something’ and ‘and things’ were translated appropriately as *oder so (was)* and *und so (was)* respectively. Interestingly, 40% of the respondents explained *oder so* as an equivalent of ‘or so’. This resonates with Terraschke and Holmes’ (2007) observation that German speakers used ‘or so’ as general extender (“the cheapest *or so*”). They did not translate ‘and all those kind of things’ word for word, *und so* and *und so weiter* being preferred. This again echoes Terraschke’s (2007) suggestion that NSGs did not use ‘and things’ because of a lack of word-for-word equivalent.

Moving now to Part Two, answers to the question about the ease of translation into German (see Table 2) confirmed the impression gained from analysis of Part One that translation was straightforward. 86% of respondents believed that word-for-word translation of all or part of the sentences was possible.

**Table 2**

Perceived ease of translation English VL to German

Word-for-word translation	55%
Partial word-for-word translation	31%
Rewriting to translate	14%

Well over half of the German respondents felt that they could translate word-for-word. Respondents highlighted that they found it easy to translate ‘that thing’, some of them listing translations again, as Extracts (1) and (2) show. They all pointed out that for ‘thingymajig’, *Dingsbums* and *Dingsda* were the obvious translations. ‘Do’ was reported to translate smoothly to *machen* or *tun*. Although they were confident about the possibility of word-for-word translation, comments about the general extenders frequently exposed confusion between ‘and things’ and ‘or something’, as illustrated in Extract (1), which suggests that the respondents understood them to have the same meaning and usage. Other general extenders were proposed that seemed to have a different meaning, as illustrated in Extract (2).

(1)

'that thing'--> *Ding, Sache, Zeug, Dings, Dasda, Gedöns, Blabla*; 'thingymajig'--> *Dingsda, Dingsbums*; 'and things'/'or something': *oder/oder so, ne?*

(2)

For ending a sentence, we can say *oder so* (= 'or so'), '*u.s.w.*' (= 'and so on'), *und das alles* (= 'and all that')

Extract (2) illustrates the *oder so* - 'or so' negative transfer, also present in Part One responses.

A third of the respondents supported 'partial word-for-word translation'. They felt that the possibility of a literal translation depended on the word. Extract (3) emphasises that the words cannot be translated in succession, because of the German main verb final position. Others referred to the difficulty of translating 'and things' and its co-text. One said "It is very seldom that German sentences end with *und Dinge* (= 'and things'). The structure of the sentence is different". These findings reflect Part One findings. Other respondents commented that an addressor's intention can be reflected in their choice of words: Extract (4) contains the opinion that "it's important to hear *how* somebody says things".

(3)

Sometimes you can translate the words word for word and have the same meaning --> 'thing', 'do', but sometimes you have to translate the whole sentence like 'I've done all the people'. If you translate it word for word there's no sense anyway: *Ich habe getan alle Leute*

(4)

Sometimes you can translate word for word, but sometimes one word changes the meaning of the sentence. But it's important to hear *how* somebody says things because it could give more meanings than just one.

A small proportion (14%) of the respondents would have been happier re-writing the whole sentence or utterance and some were adamant that word-for-word translation was insufficient, as Extracts (5) and (6) demonstrate. Regrettably they did



not give examples of re-written sentences. On the other hand, no respondents stated a belief that translation was impossible.

(5)

You have to understand the meaning of the whole language, the context in that the vague word is use

(6)

You can not get the same meaning and tone with just translating word for word. It's very hard to get the exactly same meaning in a German sentence.

The question about other VL features in German elicited a wide range of answers. Table 3 shows the percentage of forms in each of the categories.

**Table 3**

Other VL forms perceived in German

Vague lexical items	33%
Vague non-verbal indicators	50%
Vague epistemic stance indicators	17%

50% of the comments referred to vague non-verbal indicators. Many of the sounds were general non-committal filler sounds, the most frequent being *hmm*, explained as 'well' and 'thinking', and *mmmh*, explained by one thus: "If I don't know the answer straight away, this gives me time to think about". Other very frequently mentioned indicators were *naja* meaning 'well' or 'right' and *ähm*, explained thus: "German people say *ähm* when they think over the structure of a sentence when asked a question, or when they're missing a word". Two sounds were explained in terms of response avoidance: the very frequent *pff* was described by one, "I say *pff* and shrugging when I don't want to explain why"; *ja ja* was explained by another as occurring "if you're asked to do anything and you haven't got time to discuss or don't want to discuss". The numerous others, amounting to fillers and backchannels, included *ach*, *äh*, *aha*, *ähm ja*, *häh*, *muuh*, *off*, *puh* and *uff*.

33% of the comments listed vague lexical items. Ones that featured predominantly were vague responses to a health enquiry. Frequent was the

expression *geht so*, which would be equivalent to answering “How’s it going?” with “Going all right”. Respondents alluded to topic avoidance, such as “I sometimes say *geht so* when I don’t want to tell that I’m not feeling great”, and “German people, asked how they feel, answer *geht, danke* when they feel indifferent but do not want to explain why”. *Passt schon*, meaning literally “fits already”, and translating as ‘OK’, was another frequently cited answer to the health enquiry, again explained in terms of topic avoidance: “That means that I feel ok and that I don’t want to talk further about that theme.” Another response was the vague adjectival expression *so la la*, glossed as “meaning neither good nor bad, something in between”; some British NSEs might see ‘middling’ or ‘OK-ish’ as equivalents. A frequently mentioned feature was the non-committal yes-no question response. The most frequent in this sub-category was *Jein*, a combination of *ja* (‘yes’) and *nein* (‘no’), explained by one as a solution “if you are not sure whether to say yes or no”. *Tja*, phonetically very close to *ja*, was cited as useful “When you don’t know the answer or you are not sure”, as were *jaaah* and *joah*. These were different from *naja* (‘well’ or ‘right’) and response-avoiding *ja ja*, which were categorised as vague non-verbal indicators because they did not have a pseudo-agreement ‘yes-ish’ function.

17% of the comments contained a reference to vague epistemic stance indicators, indexing explicitly a lack of knowledge, in order to evade an answer to enquires and demands for opinion. The most frequent item noted was *weiß nicht* (‘don’t know’). Others were *kein Plan* (‘don’t know’), *keine Ahnung* (‘no idea’) and *was weiß ich* (‘what do I know’). Respondents also listed vague modal adverbials *vielleicht* (‘maybe’) and *kann sein* (‘could be’).

These three VL types seemed to constitute a non-observance of the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975), and a lack of interest in the quality of relations. Alternatively, it could be said that they were merely a flouting of the cooperative maxim of manner, since interlocutors were expected to understand “I don’t want to give you a precise answer”. In this sense, they were conventionalised impoliteness formulae (Culpeper, 2011), an acceptable code for light dismissal. However these forms might be interpreted, respondents evidently did not see these features as positive politeness mechanisms.

Finally we come to the question about the social and functional context of German VL, which is a core interest in this study. There was a wide range of

answers: social variation according to depth of relationship and the positive sociopragmatic function of expressing informality topped the list, as Table 4 shows (the percentages refer to types out of all forms). There were no references to the textual function, and the epistemic function was low on the list.

**Table 4**

Perceived variation and function of German VL

Social variation	relationship	35%
	status	8%
	setting	6%
	age	6%
	educational level	5%
Social function	informality	17%
	indifference	10%
	avoidance	3%
Epistemic function	uncertainty	10%

There were twice as many references to aspects of social variation as there were to social functions. 35% of all comments suggested that VL choice was influenced by the relationship between the speakers, noting that it was “natural” between family and friends. They related the relationship dimension to the sociopragmatic function of showing solidarity, saying that VL in German is a marker of “shared meaning, affection and trust”, and that it creates “closeness”, “intimacy” and a “feeling of belonging”. Respondents explained that good friends understand each other “without a correct sentence” and that they can “even say only one word” and friends know what they mean. Extract (7) takes this one stage further: the understanding is not limited to the current text but applies to ongoing texts: “they know who I am”. Extract (8) brings gestures and facial expressions into the mix.

(7)

I use vague language when I don't have to think about what I'm saying. With friends I can talk the way I like because they know who I am and if there are misunderstandings we can easily solve them.

(8)

Sometimes good friends understand each other without a correct sentence. A friend says one word and I know what he or she means. I know what she means when I look into her eyes/face, the smile says me what she means.

8% of comments referred to status as an influencing factor in VL, and in doing so, they mostly pointed to the fact that they would not use VL with a “teacher, professor or a boss”. They noted that it is inappropriate for the person of lower status to talk to the person with higher status using VL. One respondent expressed a belief that the person of a lower status who used VL would seem to be over self-confident and attempting to be on the level of their superior. Several respondents provided examples of appropriate and inappropriate speech, for example “you can't talk with a teacher and say *hmm* or *pff*”. Extract (9) contains an example:

(9)

The vague words are used depending on their context and their use with different people (friends, bosses, professors etc.). With friends you would talk more colloquial (*oder was* = ‘or what’) and with professors you would rather say *oder etwas ähnliches* (‘or something similar’)

Closely related to status is the dimension of setting (6% of comments), since it is in formal work and study contexts that the respondents reported encounters with people of higher status. Many of these comments referred to social distance in settings, often containing evaluations of the appropriateness of VL in formal contexts. Extract (10) demonstrates how evaluations were part of the descriptions provided.

(10)

Standing in front of a class or talking with authorities or speaking in front of a group I would not use them that often (or at least I would not try). Sounds to me a bit more incompetent.

The fact that they believed that VL had no place in educational settings conflicts with studies of English-speaking classroom interaction, where educators and students used VL to save face (Rowland, 2007; Ruzaité, 2007). Some respondents' responses seemed to imply an association between the setting and social class; one noted that VL was not acceptable at university (presumably middle class) but that it was appropriate in factories or 'other places' (presumably working class). Again, studies have shown that English VL is employed during interactions in formal work. VL was associated, for some, with a low level of education. 5% of their comments seemed to express a degree of social prejudice. One suggested that a person who "needs the word *Ding* very often can not be good in his language". Extract (11) provides an example of this.

(11)

Mostly they indicate that one is uneducated or has a low amount of vocabulary.

6% of the comments brought in the dimension of age, often suggesting that young people have their own form of VL in 'youth language'. One noted that "in some social contexts", teenagers use VL to be 'cool'. This tallies with the findings of Stenström, Andersen and Hasund (2002:86). The respondents' comments about the VL of young people most likely bear some resemblance to reality, given that studies of English have shown that young people have their own VL features. Again, some appeared to link this with social class, and again using expressions that suggest disapproval: one pointed out that VL can cause comprehension problems when used across generations. Extract (12) highlights the negative impressions that young people's VL creates.

(12)

Slang within groups of juveniles. Such words can lead to the impression that a person isn't reliable and that you better should answer somebody else.

As far as social function is concerned, 17% of comments contained a reference to the friendly informality that VL creates, noting that it makes for a "casual", "relaxed", "at ease", "cool", "chilled" atmosphere, relating this social function to the

variational dimension of depth of relationship, as Extracts (13) and (14) show. Extract (14)'s words "you have ... a lot in common with the people you talk to" point to a deeper relationship or a community of practice.

(13)

I use vague words when I talk to friends to create a feeling/impression of *Verbundenheit* ('closeness'). The other person knows what you're thinking without the expression, no matter how old the other one is, it's just important how close he/she stands to you.

(14)

These words are used in a relaxed social context and indicate that you have a close connection or at least a lot in common with the people you talk to

There was no mention of the function attenuating negative discursive moves.

10% of the comments focused on negative associations with VL, this type of comment being labelled 'indifference' for the sake of argument. Some saw VL as a style used when addressors were "too hurried" to provide more details and saw no reason for explicitness, or when addressees were not interested and not paying attention to what was being said. Extract (15) contains an overt expression of indifference, a vague way of saying "I am not interested", flouting the maxim of manner. Other respondents simply associated it with laziness and incompetence; one noted that when talking to strangers or people of higher status, VL could create a sense that one is "bored", "much too lazy to answer a question", "sloppy or far too casual". Respondents explained that VL can be used when one is "annoyed", "angry" or "enervated" and do not have the patience to find more precise words. Extract (16) covers many of these emotional interactional issues.

(15)

If somebody talks too much, I say "aha, aha, aha" till he/she stops to speak.

(16)

If you want to have distance to people you don't like, if you're not that interested in something (a thing) and you're a bit stressed and don't want to explain yourself that much

These attitudes would seem to be at odds with their view expressed that VL was a marker of friendliness and a relaxed atmosphere. VL is described in a more negative light in the context of interactions with those who are not family and close friends, where it is feared to give a bad impression.

A very small proportion of comments (3%) showed that VL was associated with the negative social function of avoidance. This tallies with the findings about the vague non-verbal indicators and the vague lexical features used as topic avoidance. The avoidance function is different from the epistemic one, in that the former is a question of indicating an unwillingness to talk, whereas the latter indicates that the truth-value of the proposition is not to be trusted. 10% of comments made reference to this point. Respondents were aware that VL can serve to fill both lexical and propositional gaps. Typical comments were “you would use them if you can't think of the right words”, “we normally use words like *Dingsbums* if we can't remember the word”, and “sounds (without meaning) like *hmm* to gain time or to overplay his/her insecurity”. Extract (17) illustrates this. One respondent made the point that the referent would generally be expected to be known by the interactant (see Extract 18)

(17)

The words are important for people they don't know the right word when somebody wants to say *gib mir mal die Schere* (= ‘pass me the scissors’) then he says *gib mir mal das Ding* (= ‘pass me that thing’) and he shows it.

(18)

If you don't remember a word, if you don't find an appropriate word, you expect that your partner of the conversation knows what you mean

This correlates with the vague epistemic stance indicators mentioned in the description of German VL forms, where the most frequent items were propositional hedges such as *weiß nicht* (‘don't know’).

## 7. Conclusion

It is hoped that English language educators of NSGs will benefit from this insight into how a number of NSGs viewed German VL. Armed with knowledge of their

students' possible preconceptions, they will be better equipped to help them identify areas of positive and negative transfer. This study may also enable educators of German to understand how German VL might be perceived, so that they, too, do not approach their learning with preconceived ideas.

The respondents seemed to have a good metapragmatic awareness of German VL. Most had no difficulty locating equivalents of English general nouns, general verbs and adjunctive general extenders, feeling that word-for-word translation was always or nearly always possible. They believed that German VL sets an informal tone, creates closeness and can indicate uncertainty, which correlates with studies of English VL. Thus educators can help learners to notice areas of positive language transfer. Some respondents had problems with English general extenders. They explained *oder so* as the equivalent of 'or so', and objected that 'and things' does not translate word-for-word, and thus educators can help learners to avoid negative transfer.

Respondents appeared to have a negative attitude towards other aspects of vagueness. They listed evasive sounds and responses, which constitute mild impoliteness, suggesting that they do not see all VL as related to solidarity. Educators should ask their NSG students how they see German VL, as such an attitude might lead them to reject attempts to teach them English VL. They could explain that VL is a feature of global English, and reassure learners that speakers of other languages have mastered English VL successfully.

Respondents' attitude towards VL in the context of social variation was somewhat negative. Although their opinion that VL is typical of talk with family and friends is echoed in the literature, their conviction that it is not acceptable with other people is contradicted by studies of German and other languages. They claimed that German VL gives an impression of incompetence in academic settings, whereas studies have shown that English VL is an acceptable convention for signalling uncertainty. They expressed a suspicion that VL makes addressors sound unreliable and causes comprehension problems. Respondents felt that it was inadvisable for the person of lower status to use VL with someone of higher status, because it made them appear over confident. They stated that a person using VL sounds uneducated. Since the 1980s, studies have shown that people of all classes use VL. Educators



could look out for such attitudes, and point out that it is used across all settings, depths of relationship, ages, statuses and classes.

Respondents' comments about social function also pointed to negative connotations. They saw German VL as symptomatic of indifference, hurried speech, impatience, laziness and incompetence. These views echo the popular belief that English VL is sloppy, woolly and inadequate. Educators who detect similar attitudes could counterbalance this with accounts of the way that English VL relates to politeness strategies, softening criticisms, and avoiding appearing overly confident.

Educators might convince learners of the legitimacy of learning about VL by explaining that it exists in other languages where it establishes rapport and mitigates face threats. NSGs might be motivated to learn that they most likely already use German VL, research having shown that German general extenders are used to create affective rapport and attenuate negative discursive moves.

In addition to awareness-raising discussions, learners could be helped to 'notice' VL forms and functions in authentic texts. Learners who are given explicit instruction about pragmatics matters tend to outperform those who receive none (Takahashi 2001). They could be encouraged to engage in interactive tasks, such as problem-solving and role-plays (Ishihara and Cohen, 2010; O'Keeffe et al, 2011; Murray, 2012).

Finally, it is hoped that this study will encourage others to continue the exploration of beliefs about VL in other languages, so that learners from other backgrounds can benefit, and so that sociolinguists in the area of cross-cultural pragmatics studies can widen their understanding of this important field. Variation according to setting, occupation, gender, age and class of questionnaire respondents would also merit exploration.

## **Appendix**

### **Vague Questionnaire**

#### **Part One excerpts**

How do you express in your language the vague informal words in bold underlined in the following examples, which are taken from my database of students' informal casual conversations with friends in Edinburgh University's Applied Linguistics

common room? The words in italics in brackets are there just to suggest what the vague words might be about, to help you understand better: don't translate them.

1) CM Can't remember the last time I handed in anything late.

DM (heh heh // heh heh)

CM // Usually it's three months early.

DM (heh heh) Right. (8) So I typed that thing up again after you'd gone.

CM Oh yeah.

*(questionnaire? interview schedule?)*

2) CM But- they they're paranoid about their islands er dissolving into the ocean so they've done all these cement they're called er (1.5) like - They're huge like the size of this room. One is the size of this room. And they've got thousands of these things stuck out there with the islands. So you might get a stretch of about half a mile of nice sandy beaches and then there's this huge what-you-call-it breaking the surf.

*(breakwaters? blocks?)*

3) NM Doom gloom. (1) No-one really challenged him. On this you know. Cos I mean since the Romans basically the same things are getting worse and worse.

*(conditions? situations?)*

4) BM // (heh heh heh) So who've I been divided up with?

MM With Mary. And she's not here. So you've got the whole damn thing to do

BM But I haven't got the thingymajig in my em=

BF Are you sh-sure about that?

*(task sheet? list of questions?)*

5) AM No I'd- I- s- I thought I had to - best to do the data questions first then you know // how much you've got for the essay.

CM Then you know how // much time yeah.

AM And I knew I was going to do one essay so.

CM I wanted to have a break between the two essays // so thought

*(answer the question in an exam? write?)*

- 6) AF Are you doing discourse for your core project?  
 BM No but maybe I should. (0.5). Maybe that would explain what it is about. I'm doing my option on discourse.  
 NF How do you decide // what you want to?  
 AF // I wonder why you really bother.  
*(writing about? taking?)*
- 7) DM So did you do everything? Or sort of choose a few people?  
 CM / Em. (0.5) I've done all the people.  
 DM // Really?  
*(revise? writers?)*
- 8) CM You're not bothering with going through Bloomfield and all those kind of things? ((0.5))  
 DM I don't want to write an essay.  
*(and other writers? theories?)*
- 9) DM Are you wanting here?  
 MM Sort of. Are you waiting for a lecture or something? Do you want to go for coffee?  
 DM Well no thank you.  
*(or a tutorial? supervisor meeting?)*
- 10) AF Yes but you don't have to find a baby-sitter. And you've got somebody there to go out with straight away. You don't have to sort of phone and make arrangements and things. And find out that =  
 DM = and find someone yeah. =  
 AF = your friend hasn't got a baby-sitter either even if you have.  
*(and pick them up? agree what time to come back?)*

## Part Two open questions

- 11) Do these vague words in English translate word for word into your language, or did you have to re-write the whole sentence to get the same meaning and tone? e.g. can you say 'that + *thing*', do you have an equivalent of *thingymajig*, and *do* (with lots of meanings), and is there a variety of ways of ending a sentence vaguely like *and things* and or *something*?
- 12) Are there other ways of expressing vagueness in your language? e.g. French people, asked for an opinion, answer *bof* when they do not have much to say;

Cubans, asked how they feel, say *alli* when they feel indifferent but do not want to explain why.

- 13) These vague words in English tend to be indicators of in-group membership; they create an impression of a close relationship; they're used in informal and relaxed social contexts. In your language, what do they indicate; what impression do they create; what's their function; what social contexts are they used in? Answer as fully as possible.

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